

April 10, 2022
York Center Church of the Brethren
Two Parades, Crying Stones
Luke 19:28-40, Kathy Gingrich preaching

Whew! We have made it to Palm Sunday 2022! In the history of the York Center Church of the Brethren, this is our **first ever** hybrid Palm Sunday worship. Prior to 2020, most of us never heard of or participated in Zoom church. In 2020, and 2021, we celebrated Palm Sunday from the comfort of our homes, on Zoom only church, quite possibly wearing our comfy clothes and slippers. For those of you who remembered to wear shoes to our church building today - Thank you! For those of you worshipping from home - we are grateful you and your slippers are with us. Thank you! It's a new day! Thanks be to God!

All four gospels include versions of today's text which is often described as Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. I find it easy to blur the distinct Biblical accounts into one narrative. Depending on which gospel one reads, there are unique differences in the recounting of the events leading up to and including Jesus' entering Jerusalem. Jesus rode on a donkey, or was it a foal or a colt? Was every detail pre-arranged down to the minutia of choosing a foal that had never been ridden, or it was an "off the cuff", unplanned, spontaneous moment? Some accounts record the crowds waving palm branches or tree branches in another account, the crowd laid down their coats and tunics. Was the crowd made up of Jesus' disciples and closest followers who knew him well OR the crowd included visitors to Jerusalem who were in town celebrating Passover? Had Jesus made the decision to claim and reveal his identity as the Messiah, OR, it was just another day in the life and times of Jesus? No matter the gospel version, the gospels agree - Jesus enters Jerusalem and life is forever changed.

For all that we have been through the past 2 years, and continue to endure, I wish I could depict this morning's scripture as a Norman Rockwell-esque painting. On the canvas, would be an idealized picture of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. It would be a bright, sunny warm day with blue skies and gentle breezes. Everybody would be smiling and happy. The foal Jesus was riding on would have had been freshly bathed, well groomed and manicured. Despite it being ridden for the very first time, the foal would have perky ears and a big toothy smile as it gently and proudly carried Jesus on its back. The palm branches would be artistically and beautifully shaped, just the right shade of green. No insect chewed or brown palm fronds. The roads depicted on the picture would have been swept clean by those big street sweeping trucks. Not a particle of dust would be kicked up by the pounding of the colt's hooves or the people running in the street along side Jesus. Children would be happy, playful, smiling. Birds would be singing. Everyone - - Jesus, his disciples, the visitors in town for Passover, the Roman Empire..everyone would be getting along. It would be a wondrous painting of a perfect day and everything is "right" in the world. I sure could enjoy a Norman Rockwell Palm Sunday Celebration!

However, that's not the experience Jesus had....and "spoiler alert" for the end of this sermon - it's not our Palm Sunday experience either. :)

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Several years ago, our adult Christian education class watched and discussed a series of lectures featuring the work of Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan. Some of you may recall the series - it was entitled "Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith." Borg and his colleague Crossan used their shared knowledge of Biblical scholarship to more fully understand the historical Jesus. They use their teachings, writings and lectures to demonstrate that a better understanding of the historical Jesus can actually lead to a deeper spiritual faith that is meaning-full and sustaining. Borg and Crossan shifted the emphasis from creed or dogma, to seeing Jesus as teacher of counter-cultural wisdom, a Spirit Guide, a prophet and founder of a movement that challenged both the power and authority of the Roman Empire and the strict, religious, conservatism of the Sadducees.

Borg and Crossan also collaborated on a book, "The Last Week: A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus Final Week in Jerusalem." They assert there were actually two parades, two processions occurring simultaneously in Jerusalem during Passover, which would have been a sacred week for the Jews. The Feast of Passover has religious obligations, but it also has political significance. It celebrates the Israelites exodus from Egypt. The Israelites, freed from their slavery, restored to their humanity are promised land and leadership by God.

According to Borg and Crossan, in the year 30 AD, two parades or processions would have made their way into Jerusalem from opposite sides of the city. From the Mount of Olives and the villages on the east side of Jerusalem, Jesus rode into town on a donkey, accompanied by his disciples and followers and welcomed by those who heard the stories of his teachings and miracles. They were the downtrodden, the misfits, the marginalized, the peasants and the "essential workers". Arriving from the west and entering Jerusalem across town was an elite column of Roman soldiers, with stallions, chariots, and military might. At the head of the parade would have been a stately war horse being ridden by the Roman governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate. Pilate likely lived in his summer home in the port city of Caesarea Maritima, but would have been obligated to be in Jerusalem during passover to show might and power and to keep the Jews celebrating Passover "in line". Pilate's procession and followers would have included the imperialists, the wealthy, the powerful, and all the glitz and glamor that comes with "might makes right" and "winner takes all."

Because uprisings had occurred during previous Passovers, Pilate and his military and political foot soldiers would have reported to duty in Jerusalem to intimidate and dominate those who gathered during the Passover Celebration. Pontius Pilate's responsibilities were to uphold the sovereignty of the Roman Empire. Corrupt practices had infiltrated both church and state. The Roman Empire and the temple Pharisees and Sadducees were not to be challenged or removed from power. Pontius Pilate's procession proclaimed and enforced the power of the Roman Empire.

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Jesus' procession proclaimed the reign of God. Jesus' entry into Jerusalem riding on a foal is the fulfillment of the prophecy in Zechariah 9:9 which foretold of the coming of Zion's King "Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt the foal of a donkey. He will proclaim peace to the nations." Jesus's procession offers another way of living. Jesus has been teaching and preaching about the reign of God. The disciples and crowds who surrounded Jesus would have seen, experienced or at least heard that he is the One who brings good news to the poor, heals the brokenhearted, gives sight to the blind, releases the captive, lets the oppressed go free. Jesus welcomed the downtrodden and the outcast. Jesus set a place at the banquet table for those other deemed unacceptable. He forgave the sinner, loved the enemy and even gave life to the dead. He had power to curse the fig tree and raise Lazarus from the dead. He is the one they had been waiting for. He is the Prince of Peace!

For the Roman Empire, peace was attained through conquests and subjugation of conquered lands and people. For Jesus, peace is attained through love of God, neighbor and self, through restored relationship and living peacefully with God, others and all creation. Shalom. Wholeness. Wellbeing.

The two processions, arriving from opposite sides of Jerusalem, and with two very different agendas were on a collision course. It will be the differing beliefs and practices that each of these processions represents that ultimately leads to Jesus' death.

Borg writes "what is important for us to understand about the last days of Jesus' is that his death was not planned or required by God, and that it was not about the forgiveness of sin. His death was an execution: he was killed by the powers, religious and political, that ruled his world. They did so, not because Jesus had to die for the sins of the world, but because his vision was a threat to the way things were and he was beginning to attract a following. So they snuffed him out. That's what Good Friday is about. Easter is about God's vindication of Jesus, God's 'Yes' to Jesus and 'No' to the powers that killed him." [1]

Jesus and his ragtag disciples and followers were a threat to the all powerful, all-encompassing Roman Empire. Jesus, entering Jerusalem, riding humbly on a young, inexperienced colt, through cloak draped streets signals an emerging power struggle with those who live by the motto "might makes right" and "winner takes all". Jesus being Jesus was perceived as a challenge or threat to those who ruled by authoritarianism, dictatorship, intimidation and torture.

I wanted this to be a cheery, Normal Rockwell-like, palm waving, cloak laying down happy sermon where we sing praise hymns, shout Hosannas, and continue our

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lives with a feel good sermon to launching us into a new week Accentuate the positive. praise, praise and more praise. Maybe this Palm Sunday would be the year we could all just quietly blend in with the disciples and crowds surrounding Jesus. We could stand with those who were joyful, excited, shouting Hosannas and Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord. Proclaim peace in heaven and glory in the highest." Proclaiming Good News - having good news to share - that would be something to get excited about.

Unfortunately. the realities of this text and the times of Jesus' procession into Jerusalem can dampen even the cheeriest of parades.

Likely the followers in Jesus' procession were "the have nots", struggling under Roman occupation, living in poverty, burdened by unfair taxation, and the corruption and power plays of the Pharisees, Sadducees and the wealthy. Neither the government or the temple were safe and welcoming places. Despite all that - the followers of Jesus praised God for what God had done and was going to do. Jesus was their hope for a new religious and political order. A celebration of epic proportions was unfolding in Jerusalem. So much so that the religious leaders, the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus "teacher, order your disciples to stop". The Pharisees were afraid that Jesus, the crowd, and the religious and political implications they represented would come to the attention of the Roman authorities. Jesus' teachings and understanding and practice of the scripture would be perceived as a threat to the ruling government. The result would bring more oppression and hardship among the Jews. Instead of rebuking the crowd as the Pharisees asked, Jesus rebukes the demands of the Pharisees. "I tell you...if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out", or as some versions translate, the stones will shout!

The idea of hard, cold, inanimate stones crying out disrupts our understanding of the natural order. Stones crying out might have been a colloquialism or slang expression. It may also have been a way of declaring Jesus is Lord over heaven and earth. The colt, the stones...all of nature is included in the God's reign. Other scriptures have references to inanimate objects praising God... In Psalm 114:6, the mountains leap, Isaiah 55:12, mountains and hills will burst into song, trees of the field will clap their hands...Psalm 148..sun, moon, stars, heaven, waters, animal..praise God. All creation, living and inanimate, praises God and shouts for joy. ALL of nature, stones included, recognizes the One who is to be praised in their midst - Jesus.

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The prophets foretold a messiah who would come and set the captives free. Jesus is the Messiah, the one they have been waiting for. Can this be the long awaited moment? Is Jesus God's agent to set God's people free? Is now the time God will restore justice and bring lasting peace? Will Jesus drive out the Roman occupiers, and overthrow the Roman Empire? Will Jesus bring an end to taxation without mercy? Can voting rights and fair wages be far behind? The concerns of the people are sounding very familiar.... Jesus represents hoped for peace and a new world order with justice and freedom. With all the excitement and expectations, it was a fertile moment.

I recently had the opportunity to visit the Immersive Van Gogh exhibit in Chicago. Despite my longing for a Norman Rockwell Palm Sunday this year, I really don't know a lot about art. But a friend who had visited the exhibit said it was impressive, powerful and fun. She highly recommended I see it. Here's what I experienced. During a run time of about 30 minutes, many Van Gogh paintings are projected on to the walls, floor and ceiling. The pictures "come to life" and then fade away as another painting emerges on the "canvas", the canvas being the walls, floor, and ceiling. There are 3 rooms of varying sizes and a balcony over the largest room where one can sit or stand and watch the exhibit. We watched it twice - once from the balcony and the second time from a smaller room. Same show, different perspective. However, no matter where we watched, it's impossible to remain a neutral, detached outside observer. There are many projectors projecting the images on all the surfaces...and soon, the colors, shapes and forms are projected on to us as well. Our shoes are touching the images as the images dance across the floor and bounce back up on to our shoes. The images that are projected all around us, are also projected on to our jackets and clothing and we become part of the Van Gogh immersive experience. I've never seen or experienced anything like it before. While observing the shifting images of Van Gogh's paintings, we become part of the canvas displaying his artistry.

My imaginary, fantastical Norman Rockwell Palm Sunday painting doesn't exist...but if it did, it would be a framed picture hanging on the wall to be observed. The immersive Van Gogh exhibit does exist. It is participatory and the paintings and the projected and reflected images get "all over us". No worries! This is not an advertisement for the Immersive Van Gogh exhibit, and I have no paid relationships with the exhibition to disclose. However, I think both the Norman Rockwell Palm Sunday painting that I've imagined in my mind and the immersive Van Gogh exhibit offer two differing understandings of Jesus' final entry into Jerusalem. We can see Palm Sunday as a painting on a wall, a snap shot in time, seeing only what is on display before us, and failing to see all that has come before

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or follows that moment in time. We can miss, ignore or fail to take the time to understand all the social, cultural, religious and political undercurrents that culminate in Jesus' entering Jerusalem. Or, we can have an Immersive Palm Sunday experience, where the events leading up to Jesus' riding into Jerusalem, the procession, and the happenings that follow, emerge and dissolve and transform those who participate. The Palm Sunday experience gets all over us...and our lives are forever changed.

Two parades processed into Jerusalem in AD 30. One parade maintained the status quo, continuing and enforcing the tactics of control, dominance, intimidation, political and religious abuse. Another parade processed into Jerusalem and ushered in a new way of living - of humility, of justice, of peace. One parade worshipped false gods and praised Pontius Pilate, governor of Judea serving under Emperor Tiberius, a part of the Roman Empire. The other parade praised God and proclaimed Jesus to be the Messiah, the one who was ushering in the reign of God. A movement that could not, would not be stopped...and even if the people failed to shout Hosanna...the stones would declare the Glory of God.

Like those living in the first century, we too live in a time of wars and conflicts. Political parties, nations and empires are competing for control, domination and wealth. Sadly, some government and religious organizations have become purveyors of disinformation, bias and corrupt policies and practices. Through overt aggression or muted manipulations issues of power and control dominate our families, communities and world. There are 2 parades...we can watch the precision and vastness of the parades that portray might makes right with vast weapons of mass destruction and unchecked power or we can wave palm branches and lay down cloaks as we follow Jesus in pathways of peace, justice - a life changing immersive experience.

Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! And don't worry, even if we get caught up with a different crowd than we intended or act like the disciples who betrayed, denied and abandoned Jesus in the days that were to come..the stones have us and will continue to proclaim the reign of God on heaven and earth! Ride on! Rock on!

1 Borg, Marcus J, Crossan, John Dominic. "The Last Week: A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus' Final Week in Jerusalem." (What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Final Days in Jerusalem) HarperOne, 2007